

Vietnam

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Islam was brought to Hindu/Buddhist Champa (present-day southern Vietnam) by Arab and Persian sailors and merchants who plied the rich Asian trade routes during the first Islamic century. As the region's aloewood soon became a profitable commodity, small commercial settlements appeared. Islam made slow but steady progress among the Cham aristocracy and educated classes. At the time of Champa's final military defeat and territorial absorption by Vietnam in the 1490s, the Cham were predominantly Muslim. After their loss of political independence and during subsequent Vietnamese dynastic struggles, in which the Cham fared quite badly, many Cham fled to Cambodia. The Cham royal court remained centred in Phan Rang until 1693, after which it moved to Cambodia and continued to function for over a century in a much diminished capacity. The Cham who remained behind were isolated by successive Vietnamese dynasties from the Islamized Malay world, with which they shared a common religion and culture and, to a lesser degree, language. With the incorporation of Vietnam into the French colonial empire during the nineteenth century, all official assimilation policies stopped and were replaced by a policy of benign neglect.

Under the French, the Cham found themselves in two different colonies: Cochin China in the south, and Annam in the centre. As a result, the communities gradually became quite distinct from each other. This remains the case today, and has resisted all attempts at achieving ethnic unity.



Cham historic monuments: Statues in Thap Cham temple near Phan Rang, 1993.

The Cham of Cochin China

In Cochin China, the Cham were largely concentrated in 7 villages in the province of Chau Doc. Their leaders' authority was restricted to village religious affairs. The leading official of each village, the Saykol Islam (Shaykh al Islam), was appointed by the French. Lesser officials of the religious hierarchy, in order of importance, were the *hakem*, who served as judge and village head; the *ong mam* (imam), who was in charge of the village mosque; and the *ahly*, who oversaw the small communal worship halls (*surau*) and religious activities in the countryside.

A *madrasa* was attached to each mosque. Local education consisted in memorizing and reciting the Qur'an, as well as explaining its meaning to the children. The language of instruction was *Jawi* (Malay written in a modified Arabic script). Because of its central importance in Cham communal life, Malay soon became the language of the local Cham elite. In the 1930s, the Cham started to write their own language in a similar modified Arabic script, as the traditional Sanskrit-derived script was no longer in use. A romanized alphabet was also used. Both scripts are still in use today.

The Cham Muslims of Vietnam



The Cham of Annam

In the centre of Vietnam, the French set up the protectorate of Annam, which they ruled through a compliant court in Hue. The local Cham divided themselves into two groups: Cham Bani and Cham Kafir (or Cham Jahit). Both groups, although very unorthodox, saw themselves as true Muslims. Among the Cham Bani, each family provided one person to be trained in religious matters. Known as the *ong char*, this person observed the cult of the ancestors and other religious duties in the village. The *ong mam* prayed and fasted on behalf of the community, while the villagers showed their devotion by prostrating during the prayers and bringing offerings to the temple.

The Cham Kafir followed the old ways. Their worship centred around two Cham kings: Po Klong Garai and Po Rome. Temples to these two kings still stand in Thap Cham (Phan Rang) and have become tourist sites. Each year, the faithful would go to the temple to wash and clothe the statues of the kings, and then parade them outside in a time-honoured ceremony. During the rest of the year, the temple was closed.

The Cham of Annam were concentrated around Phan Rang: in the districts of Phan Ri, Phan Thiet, Ah Phuoc, and Binh Thuan. Originally, the French were in charge of their affairs, but during the 1930s and 1940s the French appointed Cham officials to manage their districts' affairs.

Education, as in Chau Doc, was confined largely to Islam. The Cham 'scholars' taught Kitab (the Qur'an) and Kitab al Hamd, and continued to use the traditional Cham script (*akal tauk*). As their society was closed, the language stagnated and gradually incorporated many Vietnamese words. Currently, approximately two-thirds of the Cham dialect spoken in this area consists of Vietnamese words. As many Malay words have been incorporated into the Cham dialect in the Chau Doc, communication in Cham between the two areas is sometimes problematical.

The Cham Today

Today, the Cham in Vietnam number less than one percent of Vietnam's approximately 70 million people. They are concentrated in three areas: the region surrounding the former Cham capital of Phan Rang, Ho Chi Minh City, and the southern provinces of Tay Ninh and Chau Doc. The province of Chau Doc hosts the local 'institute' of higher Islamic studies. Teaching is supplemented by village elders and others who have some Islamic knowledge. Cham communities remain isolated from the Vietnamese by mutual suspicion. Most of their members are poorly educated, as school is not compulsory and parents need their children's labour in the fields and the home. Schooling is available in the Cham language for approximately 3 years, after which the language of instruction is Vietnamese.

The Cham Jahit have retained pre-Islamic religious elements. For example, I attended *tarawih* prayer services in a Cham Jahit mosque in Phuoc Nhon in 1993. Many worshippers, dressed in white robes, performed the Buddhist triple prostration while facing the direction of prayer. Only the imam and his assistants were fasting and praying their version of the prescribed prayers. Their *adhan* bore no resemblance to the traditional Muslim *adhan*, nor did the prayer ceremonies which were conducted by roughly 10 assistants reciting and bowing before what appeared to be very tall candles while the imam sat to one side and talked with those sitting close to him. I was shown their Qur'an, which was a thick book containing Qur'anic verses in Arabic along with an interlinear Cham explanation. However, as very few of them could read Cham and none could read Arabic, we were told that the book was a mystery. When my travelling companion read it in Arabic and explained it to them in Cham, they were amazed.

The Vietnamese government's attitude toward the Cham is becoming more relaxed, partly due to Hanoi's good relations with Indonesia and Malaysia. Permits to expand or build mosques are granted, usually after

lengthy bureaucratic procedures, and the people are allowed to raise money locally and abroad. Islamic literature is allowed, but there are some restrictions. For example, various members of the Cham Muslim Foundation have spent years translating the meaning of the Qur'an into Vietnamese, as well as books on basic Islamic beliefs, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and stories of his Companions. When these books appear in Vietnam, they may or may not be banned. Books also come in through Malaysian and Indonesian diplomatic channels. In the near future, one thousand copies of the Vietnamese translation of the meaning of the Qur'an are scheduled to be printed in Vietnam. Cham students can leave the country to study Islam or other subjects, provided they are high school graduates and academically qualified, and if they have enough money. Almost no Cham can meet these requirements, as their communities are poor and the level of formal education is quite low. In addition, I was told that at least one Vietnamese government official has been sent to Saudi Arabia to study Arabic and Islam so that the government will have a better idea of Islam and Islamic culture. ♦

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